

Article

# The Ghost of the ‘Y’: Paternal DNA, Haunting and Genealogy

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**Abstract:** Based on a personal family history experience, in this paper, I consider the way in which genealogical DNA testing is revealing family secrets, in particular paternity secrets, which would previously have remained unknown via ‘traditional’ methods of genealogical research. Reasons for the displacement of these invisible fathers from the records are discussed, and the power of genealogical DNA testing to bring them into focus is examined. Such discoveries may disrupt and unsettle, causing people to think differently about the fathers and grandfathers with whom they have grown up or have believed to be part of their personal histories and, for some people, may challenge their sense of identity. Beyond personal identity issues, in this paper, I draw upon ideas about ‘ghost-work’ to suggest that these experiences have some of the features of hauntings and that the ghostly fathers who break through may speak to us about social realities and structures, beyond the confines of linear time.

**Keywords:** family history; hauntology; genealogical DNA; paternity secrets

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## 1. Introduction

This is a story about ghosts—the ghost of my father and of his father and the way in which they have haunted me through my family history research. Although, in that respect, this is a personal account, my reflections on the experience of researching my paternal ancestry have raised wider questions, as I came to realise the relevance of what started as a private project to some of my professional and academic interests as a social work educator.

In discussing my family history research, I acknowledge that I do so from a particular perspective, related to my own gender, ethnicity, nationality, education and experience.

I acknowledge too that both ‘traditional’ methods of genealogical research—that is, documentary research using physical or digital resources—and more recent methods—involving online searching of huge numbers of genealogical records, facilities to share information and communicate online with other family researchers and genetic testing, largely delivered via US-based companies—rest upon a set of normative assumptions about family, kinship, reproductive relationships and biological identity (Patton-Imani 2018). These are the same assumptions that are reflected and perpetuated in social and cultural practices, legislative and policy provisions and dominant narratives of ‘the family’ in Western countries, such as the United Kingdom, but that do not represent the variety of family and kinship forms here or elsewhere in the world (Lawler 2014).

Work with families and the complex relationships and patterns of behaviour that may trouble, disturb or damage family members, particularly children, is central to the practice of social work, as is understanding the potential consequences of these difficulties and of our responses to them. In such difficult situations, decisions made by the ‘authorities’ or privately by families themselves sometimes result in the fracturing of biological families. Although, in recent years, English family law has tended to encourage truth in matters of reproduction, parenthood (particularly regarding adoption) and paternity (Smart 2009, p. 553), this has not always been the legal position and certainly

not the practice of professionals or of private individuals. Smart argues that the development of DNA testing to establish paternity has forced 'legal truth' into line with biological or physical truth and has contributed to a change in attitudes towards family secrets, particularly those relating to paternity. With the commercialisation of DNA testing to determine paternity and for genealogical research, it has not only become increasingly difficult for modern parents to avoid the revelation of genetic truths but also for parents, now long dead, to keep their family secrets.

When my father died at age 86, like many bereaved families, we (my two siblings and myself) found ourselves thinking and talking about him, remembering the details of his life—a process that highlighted how little we knew about his family life and young adulthood before he met our mother. Throughout our childhood, we had learned not to expect answers to our straightforward questions about his family, and as we grew up and embarked on our independent adult lives, these questions had receded in importance for us. With his death, the questions resurfaced, and it seemed important to try to discover more about our paternal family and to understand why our father had been so reluctant to share information about his early life.

Several years on, we are still searching for answers and, in many ways, have more questions than when we started. This paper does not then describe the resolution of a family puzzle, nor is it a detailed account of the progress of our family history research. Rather, it is a response to my experience of using genealogical DNA testing, to its potential to reveal paternity secrets in particular and to the implications and consequences of such revelations. In reflecting on my experience and looking for a theoretical space within which to understand this, the paper discusses the relevance of what [Roberts \(2012\)](#) has described as 'ghost-work' to family history and genealogy.

## 2. Parental Mysteries

In a study of autobiographical memoirs written by adult children who had experienced growing up in families characterised by what he calls "parental mystery and equivocation", [Porter \(2011\)](#) includes a chapter examining five works about fathers who obscured or erased their own histories and identities. He suggests that, as adult children, the writers of these memoirs appeared to feel that they had no clear standing in their family stories until they engaged in the act of uncovering their father's secrets. Doing so involved them in a hunt for evidence, including seeking information from family members and searching the genealogical records, family archives and other documentary sources. I begin by outlining the "parental mysteries" in our family, which led me to embark upon my own search, naively expecting a straightforward uncovering of basic facts about our grandparents, their wider families and the places they had lived, which I assumed would be easily discovered in the documentary records now readily available on websites such as Ancestry, Free BMD (transcriptions of the indexes of English birth marriage and death records, searchable by name, date and place of registration) and Irish Genealogy.

The characters in this story are no longer alive, and consequently, there are no legal constraints about sharing details of their lives. The question of whether there are ethical obligations to keep the secrets of those who have died is a matter of debate. [Porter \(2011, p. 16\)](#) discusses the arguments for and against with reference to the accounts he discusses in his book and concludes that if the motivation of the individual revealing such secrets is to arrive at understanding and to share such understanding with others who have had similar experiences, then revelation is justified. [Barnwell \(2019\)](#), in a survey of Australian family historians who had discovered family secrets, found that emotional proximity, sometimes across time, to those with the secrets and perceived emotional risks to the living were influential in people's ethical decision-making as to who and what to tell about their findings. In my story, some of the details constitute secrets kept by my father, but more significant are the secrets that it seems were kept from him by his family, whose reasons for doing so I do not know and probably never will know. Neither do I know of any living close members of their families who might be distressed by the limited information I have thus far discovered. However, where I refer to individuals by name,

I have used pseudonyms out of respect for them and for anyone who might recognise them from this account.

We grew up in Manchester, England, believing our father to be an only child. Parentless by the time he married my mother when he was 28 years old, he said little about his childhood and less about his family. His father, he said, had died young; his mother, Molly, from Ireland, missed the clean country air of her childhood home. Manchester was bad for her chest, and she was often unwell. Born in 1927, he was a child of the 1930s; they were poor, life was hard. Beyond a few stories of his first school with its playground in a cellar, a brief evacuation to the safety of the countryside at the start of the Second World War, as experienced by many inner city children, and a short spell in the merchant navy when he was 20, the past was something he did not want to discuss. When my brother came home from school asking for information about the family tree for a French language project, all he got from my father was "*Mort. Mort. Mort*".

My mother told us that she knew almost nothing about the people in his life before they were married. It seems to have been a taboo subject; she didn't ask, and he didn't tell. She had never seen a photograph of his parents. On their marriage, he brought nothing with him but his clothes, some official documents (medical card, wartime identity card and a character reference from the newsagent who had employed him as a twelve-year-old paperboy), a handful of photographs from his days in the merchant navy and a book he bought in a second-hand shop at 1543 Broadway, New York, where his ship was in dry dock during 1948.

The early results of our family history research were encouraging. We quickly traced his father Lloyd back five generations, to a family of gardeners in Cheshire, North West England. Our father, it seemed, had followed in their footsteps, working as a gardener himself for most of his life. As we went on though, it became apparent that things were not quite so simple. Lloyd had not died as a young man as we had believed but, rather, when he was in his seventies. We discovered that our father had had a younger brother with whom he had quarrelled and broken off contact, probably not even knowing about his death by suicide less than three miles from where we lived. We learned too that my mother knew of his existence but had been told by my father never to mention him or to tell us that we had a paternal uncle. The brothers' birth certificates gave different first names for their mother, which was puzzling, but her three surnames on our uncle's certificate suggested that she had been married twice and, we assumed, had been widowed. Although this seemed like a genealogical gift—two marriages must surely make her easier to find in the records—the trail soon ran cold. As far as we could determine, our grandmother had never been married, either to her apparent first husband or to our paternal grandfather. We could find nothing to identify her in the UK or Irish records; the only documentary evidence of her existence was the baptismal record for my father, her two sons' birth certificates, an entry in the 1939 Register (a UK national register of civilians, taken in September 1939 following the outbreak of World War II) and her 1952 death certificate.

### 3. Paternity Secrets

Several years into our search, and running out of ideas, I decided to take a genealogical DNA test in the hope of identifying new lines of enquiry about our grandmother. I had resisted this until now; I am not sure why. Perhaps, it seemed like cheating (surely we should be able to trace our grandparents who had only died in 1952?); more likely, it was the influence of my father, who was always suspicious of sharing personal information for reasons we still do not understand.

Initial autosomal DNA tests (that is, tests of DNA inherited from both parents on the 22 chromosomes that are not sex chromosomes) of the three of us via Ancestry.com revealed matches mainly with people whose names we did not know—the exception being some relatives on our mother's side of the family with whom we were already in touch. This is not unusual, but there were several matches sharing one surname unfamiliar to us—some as close as first cousins to my father and two who were active and experienced family historians, building Irish family trees back over several generations. Having made contact with them but still unable to discover any link in the documentary records

that made sense of this connection, my brother agreed to undertake a Y-DNA test. Although most of our DNA is inherited from both parents, Y chromosomes are carried by men only, passed on largely unchanged from father to son. However, mutations do take place, and these distinctive changes can be observed and compared to identify men who are related to one another. Y-DNA testing examines two types of polymorphic DNA markers (short tandem repeats (STRs) and single-nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs)) to distinguish Y chromosomes from one another and to identify matches between men and estimate distance to their most recent common ancestor (King and Jobling 2009).

In many societies, heritable surnames also pass from father to son, and consequently, men who match one another on the Y chromosome may be expected to share surnames. Y-DNA testing was one of the first two genealogical DNA tests available commercially as direct-to-consumer tests (the other being mitochondrial DNA) and was introduced by Family Tree DNA (FTDNA) in 2000 (Wagner and Weiss 2012). The availability of these tests brought about the development of a large number of surname DNA projects, in which people with the same surname use DNA testing to explore their common ancestry (International Society of Genetic Genealogists 2019). This may be described as a form of recreational genetics (Freeman and Richards 2006; King and Jobling 2009), enabling interested participants to discover 'clan' identities, to locate the places of origin of their forbears or to explore potential links with historical tables, and has been of particular interest to members of the Irish diaspora, particularly those living in North America (Nash 2008).

Although it might be expected that Y-DNA tests would return many matches of men with the same surname, Y-DNA testing reaches far back in time, even before surnames were established, so that, in practice, testing commonly produces matches with widely varying surnames, which poses challenges for family historians. Apart from connections arising from before the era of surnames, there are several possible explanations for surname variation in results lists, which may be perceived as more or less sensitive, depending upon the distance in time since the causal event or the reasons for the individual's interest in their genetic heritage. For example, surnames may differ because of children taking on the surname of a stepfather upon a mother's remarriage, men changing their surnames to avoid being traced or upon migrating to a new country or surnames being 'daughters out' of a family so that the patrilineal surname inheritance comes to an end (Freeman and Richards 2006).

In other circumstances, which some people may experience as unsettling or even distressing, tests might produce unexpected results that reveal a historic break in the direct lineage between the tester and the assumed male ancestor. Results may show that an individual's DNA is not consistent with the shared DNA profiles of the other members in a surname project or, perhaps more troubling, may reveal that the tester does not have any DNA in common with living members of their supposed biological family, with whom they share their surname. Such results, where men have inherited their father's Y chromosome but not his name, were initially referred to as 'non-paternity events' (NPEs)—a term coined by Sykes and Irven (2000)—in explaining why males sharing the same surname might not share the same haplotype. Nash (2008, p. 237), discussing surname projects, suggests that this terminology is consistent with such failures to match being framed in terms of men's abilities to order or disorder arrangements for male–female relationships, sex and reproduction, and Patton-Imani (2018, p. 12) argues that such patriarchal gender expectations continue to be expressed in the default settings of online family genealogy sites, which are typically "colorblind, heterosexual and cis-gender". More recently, the terminology has been amended, and the acronym NPE is now used to refer to the phrase 'Not the Parent Expected', acknowledging that DNA testing (i.e., including mitochondrial, X-DNA and autosomal testing) carried out by family history researchers seeking to climb their family trees may reveal previously unknown information about the tester's maternal as well as paternal origins as a result of, for example, donor egg conception and surrogacy.

Such discoveries can be disappointing for people hoping to discover distant connections to an ancestral clan but potentially devastating when they reveal previously unknown or unsuspected information about a tester's own parents. The NPE Friends Fellowship, established in 2017, provides membership support for distressed individuals for whom such DNA results suggest, for example, a

family history of closed or secret adoption, infidelity in marriage, traumatic events such as sexual assault or exploitation or other circumstances that are or might previously have been perceived as shameful, including those that cause a father's name not to be stated in the genealogical records ([NPE Friends Fellowship](#)).

#### 4. Our 'Not the Parent Expected'

The results of my brother's Y-DNA test revealed no matches with our father's surname as recorded on his birth certificate but did show a match with several men sharing the unfamiliar surname identified by our earlier autosomal testing, suggesting that the man who brought our father up was not his biological father and, consequently, not our biological grandfather. This was 'Not the Parent Expected' for my father.

Returning to our online family history contacts and re-examining the documentary records and our earlier DNA results in the light of this new information, we identified the man who is most likely our grandfather. The evidence we have suggests that he was probably 'Dermot', the missing uncle of one of my father's first cousins with whom we had made contact online. DNA tests deal in statistical probabilities, not certainties, and those probabilities indicate that he might have been one of Dermot's brothers or, less likely, Dermot's father, his nephew or his son, if he had one ([Waldron 2018](#), email message to author). However, while we cannot be certain—the records are incomplete, the evidence is circumstantial and there are still many unanswered questions—there is no evidence that he had other children, and what we know so far places Dermot, and only Dermot, in the right place at the right time to be our grandfather.

Dermot was born in 1887 in Ireland and enlisted in the British Army in 1915 during the First World War. His medal record cards indicate that he served overseas and entered a theatre of war—although we cannot establish where and for how long—and we know that he was discharged from army service to an address in Salford, Lancashire (now part of the Greater Manchester conurbation), in June 1919. He received a small army pension, apparently due to disability related to contracting malaria.

In 1923, aged 36, he married a nineteen-year-old local woman in a civil ceremony and the following year in a religious ceremony in a Roman Catholic church in Salford, having sought the permission of his Roman Catholic parish priest back in Ireland. His occupation is described as 'hotel boots' (responsible for cleaning the boots and shoes of hotel guests) on their marriage certificate. There is no record of any children of the marriage.

Dermot died aged 40 in October 1927 in a Manchester hospital, three months after our father was born nearby. The death certificate gives the cause of death as pulmonary tuberculosis and his occupation as hotel porter. His wife was present at his death, but it appears from the certificate that they may have been living at different addresses. He is buried in a common grave in the Roman Catholic section of a Salford cemetery.

We know nothing about the nature of his relationship with our paternal grandmother.

#### 5. Family Hauntings

Finding Dermot was a surprising and exciting development in our family history research but not for me personally distressing, given that we had never known either of my father's parents or any relatives on our father's side of the family and, other than our shared surname, I had little sense of personal or family identity linked to them. Rather, with respect to our paternal family, we had grown up with a sense of absence, a lack of knowledge, a lacuna. We do not know what kind of a (step)father Lloyd was and whether our father's silence about him suggests that they had a difficult relationship—perhaps, as we now think likely, he knew or suspected that he was not Lloyd's biological child, and this was the reason for his reluctance to talk about his family experiences. So, it was surprising to me that, since learning about Dermot, he has become a pervasive presence, whose grave I have visited and whose shadow I imagine in the streets and buildings of Manchester and Salford,

where I grew up and still work and where he lived, married and died within nine years of being discharged from the British army in 1919.

Being haunted does not have to involve sightings of shadowy figures in the semi-darkness. The word is often used to describe feelings of being troubled, disturbed or preoccupied by something, or more usually by someone, and 'preoccupation' describes my experience of Dermot—the father apparently unknown to my father and the grandfather who has replaced the 'other' grandfather my father spoke of, though infrequently and in little detail. Remembered conversations with my father now take on an altered significance; puzzling and inconsistent remarks that had been forgotten or dismissed now represent lost opportunities to make a connection with Dermot. It seems that he was and is somehow there, yet not there, and that he has things to say to us or at least things that he wishes us to know. It has felt as though Dermot has haunted me, in the unanswered questions, the speculation and possibilities, the unknown details of his life and the impact of the social and political context in which it was lived.

For me, this sensation is often connected to place and occurs as I travel to and from my parents' home or my workplace, which takes me past the address in Salford to which Dermot went upon discharge from the army, through the part of nearby Manchester where we believe he worked, and to the site of the old hospital, now replaced with modern facilities, where he died. Moving through these places, I imagine them as they might have appeared to Dermot in the 1920s and question what caused him to choose to remain in England rather than return to his family home in Ireland? What were his hopes and expectations as he realised that he had survived the war—a significant achievement for a gunner in the Machine Gun Corps? What was the impact on his physical and mental health of the traumatic events he undoubtedly witnessed and experienced, and how did these affect his hopes for his future and his expectations about his life with his young wife, a relationship that it appears must have had its difficulties, given the fact of my father's existence?

Family historians perhaps would agree with Fisher (2014) that "[y]ou don't have to believe in the supernatural to believe that the family is a haunted structure". For example, in her book examining her family history and her reflections on the process of discovering it, Light (2014, p. 252) talks about her mind being filled with "a swarm of ghosts . . . their faces blurred with time", and McGann (2017, p. 302) feels inhabited by his "father's ghost" as he reflects upon his exploration of his McGann family's past. In these instances, as well, the writers' experiences reflect the "heightened state of awareness and alertness [and] sense of unease or sensitivity to a dead or missing person(s)" described by Gordon (1997) in her seminal work, *Ghostly Matters*, as evidence of a haunting.

Roberts (2012, p. 393) suggests that, while what she calls "ghost-work" has been applied across several disciplines, there is no one singular notion of haunting but that it is concerned with the past intruding into the present and can be experienced as disorientating, disruptive, unsettling and sometimes simply mundane. The notion that admitting ghosts and allowing them to speak to us might offer a valuable perspective on social phenomena is attributed to Jacques Derrida, who coined the term 'hauntology' in his work *Spectres de Marx* (Derrida 1994). Hauntology is a portmanteau term, bringing together 'ontology' (the study of being) and 'haunting' (relating to entities that simultaneously exist and do not exist) and refers to the haunting of the present by spectres that cannot be ontologised away—that is, put into an ontological category of 'being' or 'not being'. Derrida's work has been widely acknowledged and influential in literary and critical theory and in "ghost-work" in other disciplines (Roberts 2012). However, according to Davis (2005), the concept of hauntology has two related sources.

Predating Derrida's work, but familiar to him, the psychoanalysts Abraham and Torok (1972, cited Fiddler 2018, p. 3) had explored the processes involved in responses to traumatic loss, using the notion of the 'phantom' to represent lost objects (usually individuals but also places and communities) and of the 'crypt' to represent the structures built around them in the unconscious of those who had experienced such painful losses, which they suggested were often associated with shame and prohibition (Fiddler 2018, p. 4). They explain phantoms as "the gaps left in us by the secrets of others" (Abraham and Rand 1987, p. 287) and attribute to them intentions to mislead and conceal, to keep

their uncomfortable secrets and unspoken traumas from emerging, sometimes across generations. In psychoanalytical terms, for the living to be released and for the gaps in us to be filled, the ghosts must be exorcised; their secrets need to be spoken.

Derrida's 'spectres' are figures hovering between presence and absence. Unlike Abraham and Torok's phantoms, they do not carry negative connotations and require "séances . . . rather than exorcisms" (Fiddler 2018, p. 5); they are to be welcomed and understood rather than expelled. Their purpose, or perhaps their effect, is to trouble the distinctions between the past and present, dead and living, and to lead us away from the present to the past and the future and to a consideration of historical alternatives that could have been (Gordon 2011, p. 5). The sensation of being haunted is concerned with an awareness of lost or potential futures, implied by a revealing of what is hidden or absent.

Despite their differences, there are commonalities in the two approaches (Rahimi 2015). Gordon (1997) makes little reference to the work of Abraham and Torok, but her definition of haunting as a 'mediation' suggests elements of both perspectives. She speaks of it as " . . . the process that links an institution and an individual, a social structure and a subject, and history and a biography" (Gordon 1997, p. 19). Both interpretations of haunting suggest that trauma can be transferred from one individual to another and be carried intergenerationally, although the mechanisms and significance of this are conceptualised differently. Both also speak of the significance of gaps and absences and of their power to disturb the unconscious—whether in individual, psychological terms or at the social and cultural level.

## 6. 'Ghost-Work', Family History and Y DNA

How are we to understand ghosts and haunting in relation to genealogy and family history? Mason (2008) proposed four dimensions of affinities as a framework for understanding the fascination with kinship revealed through the burgeoning interest in family history. She presents these dimensions as ways of imagining and practising relatedness. 'Fixed' affinities are aspects of kinship that are experienced as given. They include biological connections but also pre-existing connections that we are born into, such as those with friends of parents known as aunts and uncles, despite their having no genetic relationship with us. 'Negotiated' or 'created' affinities are those developed through relationships and are particularly important in practices of care and support. Sensory affinities are concerned with the material aspects of relatedness, both in terms of the body (voice, smell, touch) and of artefacts such as keepsakes and inherited items—emotionally charged objects that speak to our experience of particular relationships. A fourth dimension is the "ethereal", described using words such as "psychic", "mystical" and "magical" (Mason 2008, p. 37) and which are suggestive of an 'other-worldly' dimension of kinship. She suggests that these aspects of kinship have previously been underplayed but can have a palpable, if transitory and interpretive, existence (Mason 2008, p. 40).

Kramer (2011, p. 389), in an analysis of the responses of members of the Mass Observation Project<sup>1</sup> to a 2008 directive on family history research, refers to examples of Mason's ethereal affinities surfacing only rarely in the written accounts she examined but says that when they did, such connections to the worlds of past historical experience and of ghosts and hauntings were experienced particularly intensely by the correspondents. A number of correspondents mentioned making connections with ancestors by returning to meaningful places, which for some offered the possibility of glimpsing the ghosts of those earlier generations; and one person wrote about experiencing a strong sense of unease when handling documents relating to family members, who he felt were warning him against continuing his research, a warning he acted upon. Neither Mason nor Kramer develop the notion of hauntings or ghost-work in any detail, but Kramer (2011, p. 392) suggests that the dead are significant

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<sup>1</sup> The Mass Observation Project is based at the University of Sussex and issues directives to a group of volunteer writers two or three times a year, asking them to write anonymously on specified themes.

in personal life, remaining as social agents who can influence behaviour and with the capacity to reappear in the present, as hauntings, presences and resemblances.

For [Gordon \(1997\)](#), ghosts are not decontextualized phantoms but must speak to us directly; we are part of their story. They are individuals (or places or things) who mean something to the haunted—not only their identity but also their stories are significant. They are “seething presences”, there and not there, not simply dead or missing but drawing us “... affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically” ([Gordon 1997](#), p. 8). We do not yet know—and maybe never will—how Dermot’s story intersects with ours, but the fact of his biological relationship to us and more particularly to our father, revealed ‘magically’ through Y DNA testing, has resulted in his becoming present to us.

*Secrets, Shame and Trauma:* In hauntings, the stories carried across time by ghosts, spectres or phantoms are often associated with trauma, shame and stigma; unwritten, unknown, hidden. The law relating to reproduction, family relationships and responsibilities reflects and influences questions of respectability, shame and what is considered appropriate behaviour in family matters. [Smart \(2009\)](#) discusses how this can be observed in the United Kingdom in the changing nature of what she calls “reproductive secrets” from attempts to disguise premarital conception and birth in the 19th and early part of the 20th century through secrecy about formal adoptions and more recently concerning assisted reproduction, such as donor insemination, with donor anonymity initially endorsed in English legislation until the law was changed in 2005 ([Frith et al. 2017](#)). Many of these secrets concern the question of paternity.

This is not surprising, given that maternity has generally been understood as obvious and unproblematic, whereas the fundamental uncertainty surrounding paternity has been the source of fascination throughout history and has been linked to the origins of patriarchy ([Freeman and Richards 2006](#)). Although [Milanich \(2017\)](#) suggests that, in fact, maternity is historically more ambiguous than has generally been assumed, her examination of the scientific quest for the father ([Milanich 2019](#)) demonstrates how the search for biological certainty about paternal identity has only served to reveal its social, cultural and political nature. [Turney \(2005\)](#), in her study of women with experience of ‘paternity uncertainty’ (that is, who were uncertain of the genetic fatherhood of their child), describes how many of her participants found it extremely difficult to disclose this uncertainty due to the social conditions in which they were living. They kept their secrets in order to protect themselves and their children from economic hardship, rejection by family and wider community and even potential violence, for example, where a child was born as a result of an extramarital relationship. Informal adoptions, common in England before the 1926 Adoption Act, obscured biological or natal origins ([Keating 2008](#)), perhaps to protect the reputation of unmarried girls and women within a family or community.

In his work on autobiographical memoirs of family mysteries, [Porter \(2011\)](#) found that narratives about parental secrecy appear to be more commonly written about fathers than about mothers. The fathers in the accounts that he analysed had deliberately sought to mislead or deceive their children, distorting or obscuring the facts about their origins and past lives. Shame and trauma feature in the motivations for and consequences of keeping secrets. In our family story, we now think it likely that our father was aware, or at least suspected, that Lloyd was not his biological father but that it is unlikely that he knew that Dermot was his biological father or any details about Molly’s relationship with him. His reticence in talking about his family was probably due to feelings of shame, perhaps about circumstances that to modern sensibilities would not be considered shameful at all or maybe a consequence of some undisclosed trauma in Molly’s, Lloyd’s or Dermot’s life that disturbed his life, even if he knew nothing or little about its “distant causes” ([Davis 2005](#)).

*Gaps and Absences:* Family genealogists spend a lot of time searching documentary records, trying to find missing people. Sometimes the identity of an ancestor or relative is not known or maybe their existence has not even been suspected; sometimes this search is for a known and named person who is lost in the records. [Fiddler \(2018\)](#) suggests that both spectres and phantoms reveal themselves

through breaks or deformations in language and text. Fiddler was writing about literary and cultural texts, but much family history research relies on textual sources, both on and offline. Breaks may be understood as gaps in the documentary records and deformations as factors that cause written sources to be inaccurate when compared with the original information and inconsistent with one another.

Such absences and inconsistencies occur in the historical and genealogical records for several reasons. Documents go missing or are destroyed, as was the case with most of the British military records relating to World War I, including Dermot's, which were lost in a fire when the Army Records Centre in London was hit by a German incendiary bomb in 1940 ([The Long Long Trail n.d.](#)). Where records survive, information may have been mis-transcribed from one document to another or incorrectly recorded in the first place due to carelessness or delay (apparently parish priests in Ireland for example did not always complete sacramental registers contemporaneously). Sometimes the absences may be deliberate on the part of those responsible for making the record, a consequence of social conditions at the time, such as material not being recorded for political or ideological reasons or details that may have been falsified or withheld by the people providing the information.

When registering births in England in the early 20th century, the names of both parents were recorded where the parents were or purported to be married and, if they were not married, where a man accepted that he was the father of the child and was present with the mother to register the birth. However, in some circumstances, the father's name would be missing from a birth certificate. The mother of the child may not have known or been prepared to admit the identity of the father or may have wanted to disguise the fact that a child was conceived as a consequence of infidelity or adultery on the part of the father, or she may have been the victim of rape by a known or unknown assailant.

Where a man was married, he was by law the father of any children born during the marriage, a principle common to legal traditions across most Western and many non-Western jurisdictions ([Milanich 2017](#)). Of course, this does not necessarily mean that he was the biological father of the child concerned. The child may have been conceived as a result of infidelity on the part of the mother, which may or may not be known to the registered father. His name might appear on the birth certificate where a couple presented a child as theirs when in fact one or both were not the parents; for example, grandparents may claim to be the parents of an illegitimate grandchild and register the child as theirs, bringing it up believing its mother to be its sister and its grandmother to be its mother. In some cases, the children of other relatives or even unrelated children may have been informally adopted at birth and registered by the adoptive parents. Even after the introduction of the Adoption of Children Act in England and Wales in 1926, informal adoptions are said to have continued well into the 1930s ([Keating 2008](#)).

In our father's case, there is no evidence that his mother and stepfather Lloyd were ever married, but his mother registered both my father's Catholic baptism and his birth as though they were, and it appears that neither the priest nor the registrar had any reason to suspect otherwise. We have no way of knowing whether Lloyd was aware that he was not the father of the child, whether Molly herself was sure of my father's paternity or whether Dermot knew that he had a son.

*Imagined Futures*: [Light \(2014, p. 252\)](#), reflecting on her genealogical research, describes absences in her family story as rippling through time, "shaping events, reverberating into the future", in imagery reminiscent of the functions of phantoms and spectres imagined by, for example, [Gordon \(1997\)](#) and [Roberts \(2012, p. 393\)](#), for whom ghosts blur the distinctions between binary oppositions such as fact and fiction, the natural and supernatural, the past and the future. Hauntings are not just about the past but also, as [Morris \(2018\)](#) captures vividly in her account of women who have lost their children to state care, about disrupted and imagined futures—futures that might have been or might still be.

Genealogical discoveries, such as that of our father's paternity, reviving what has been "forgotten, buried or erased from the record" ([Kleinberg 2017, p. 9](#)), not only dissolve the boundaries between past and present but between past, present and future(s).

We do not know the effect that knowledge about Dermot might have had on our father's life or even on ours, but it appears that Molly may have taken control of the 'official' family narrative through

her manipulation of the data in the church and civil records to construct a future for herself and her son. As Patton-Imani (2018) observes, writing about the regulation of illegitimacy in the United States, the social situations of women influence their access to choices in family making and may make it necessary for them to make difficult decisions to protect both themselves and their children from what they perceive as risky or shameful. Could it be that Molly was not actually our father's biological mother but that this was a family or informal adoption? Not only did she claim to be married to Lloyd, but the information she provided about her name was not consistent—she used different first names on each of the two documents and a 'maiden' name different from the one by which my father knew her. Perhaps, this was intended as a clue to his biological heritage for him to explore in the future (maybe a fanciful notion, it has proved difficult to see how); perhaps, it was to protect her own real identity. Perhaps, Molly was haunted by her own ghosts; whether through the trauma of violence or shame of betrayal surrounding the circumstances of my father's birth or the sadness of an impossible future for herself, Dermot and my father.

## 7. Conclusions

Dermot, our grandfather, was always there but was lost to his Irish family who were searching for his grave and was missing from our story. Through DNA testing and specifically through Y-DNA testing, he has become a presence. However, beneath the bare facts of his life that we have thus far uncovered is an untold story, shaped by the person Dermot was, the experiences he had and the decisions he made in the context of the political, religious, social and economic forces of the early 20th century in Ireland and Great Britain.

While it is of course true that not all surprises in family history research concern fathers, the original choice of the phrase 'Non-Paternity Events' to describe unexpected findings arising from genealogical DNA testing reflects those most commonly reported—that is, the uncovering of a paternity secret somewhere in the tester's family history. Hatton (2019) conceptualises genealogy as fundamentally a technology or craft concerned with "bringing forth to presence from concealedness to unconcealedness". Although by the term 'technology', he is referring to the broad practices of genealogy and not only or specifically to genealogical DNA testing, this recent development has the capacity to "bring forth to presence" in particularly dramatic and unexpected ways. Yet, while Y-DNA testing may tell us who was *not* the father we expected, it does not itself reveal the identity of the person who was. To have any prospect of discovering this and what it might mean to us requires the mastery of genealogical research methods, time, persistence and perhaps a willingness to look into the gaps and fissures in our family stories, allowing ghosts to pass through into our awareness and to make themselves known to us.

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